

ISAAC ROSENBERG OF BRISTOL

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BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
LOCAL HISTORY PAMPHLETS

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Isaac Rosenberg of Bristol is the fifty-third pamphlet to be published by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association. It is also the third Annual Southey Lecture, and it was delivered by Professor Charles Tomlinson of the University of Bristol at Christ Church, City, Bristol in 1981.

The Southey Lectures are promoted by the Rector and Church Council of the Old Bristol Parish (Christ Church with St Ewen and All Saints, City). They are intended to consider Bristolians who have made a major contribution to the Arts, Literature, Philosophy, Science, Politics and Religion. The series is named after Robert Southey, who was baptised in Christ Church in 1774. In 1981 Professor Charles Tomlinson, who is himself one of the most outstanding of modern English poets, chose as his subject Isaac Rosenberg, a poet and artist who was born in Bristol in 1890.

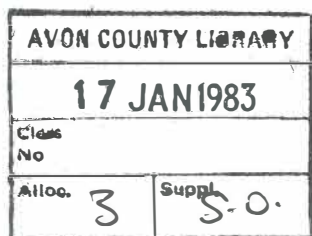
The Bristol Branch of the Historical Association wishes to acknowledge generous donations towards the cost of publication from the Publications Committee of the University of Bristol, the Parochial Church Council of Christ Church, City, the Guild of Kalendars, Mr Ralph Emanuel and Dr Basil Cottle.

The Branch is grateful to the National Portrait Gallery, the Imperial War Museum, and the Carlisle Museum and Art Gallery, for permission to reproduce copyright photographs of pictures by Isaac Rosenberg. The illustration on the front cover is from the National Portrait Gallery and is entitled *Isaac Rosenberg, Self Portrait in a Felt Hat, looking right*, (1915), oil, 10'' x 9''. The sketch map showing Isaac Rosenberg's three homes in Bristol was supplied by Dr Basil Cottle who was extremely helpful in securing the material for this pamphlet and arranging it for publication.

The next pamphlet in the series will be Daniel Briggs' study of the Bristol Post Office in the Age of Rowland Hill.

The Appeal Fund which the Branch launched at the end of 1981 in order to put the pamphlets on a sound financial basis is still open. Donations should be sent to Mrs E. Venning, Pamphlet Appeal Fund, Bristol Record Office, The Council House, Bristol, BS1 5TR.

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ISAAC ROSENBERG OF BRISTOL

Isaac Rosenberg of Bristol. To say that now is to arouse less surprise than it would have done a few years ago. When, in 1960, D.S.R. Welland wrote a book on Rosenberg's more famous contemporary Wilfred Owen, he mentioned Rosenberg en passant but had him transplanted to London, as though that were the place for a writer to be born. Despite the so-called *Complete Works* of 1937, published the better part of twenty years after Rosenberg's death, and despite a *Collected Poems* of 1949, this Jewish poet-painter was slow to attract widespread critical attention, let alone that sort of popular acknowledgement which ensured repeated printings of the poetry of Owen.

Within specialist circles he was, of course, being written about. Then suddenly and unexpectedly in 1975 appeared — not one, but three biographies of our poet.¹ These are very informative books and Joseph Cohen's *Journey to the Trenches* is perhaps the best of them. It brought forth, in the pages of *The Times Literary Supplement*, the following pithy letter from one of our poets:

Sir, — Joseph Cohen calls the marriage of Isaac Rosenberg's parents 'disastrous'. But it produced Isaac Rosenberg.

C.H. Sisson.

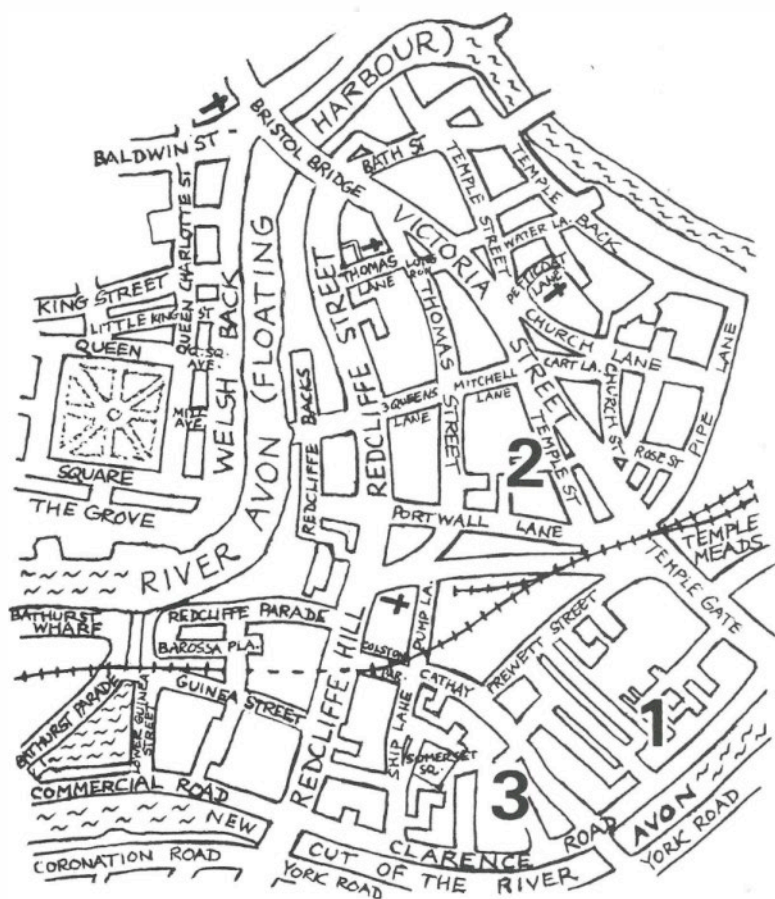
In all these biographies Bristol is still giving trouble, in so far as none of the three writers seems to know the city very intimately, and all of them offer a different place of birth. Cohen has young Rosenberg see the light of day at 5 Victoria Square, Jean Moorcraft Wilson chooses Adelaide Place but is coy about the

1. Joseph Cohen, *Journey to the Trenches, The Life of Isaac Rosenberg* (Robson Books).
Jean Liddiard, *Isaac Rosenberg, The Half Used Life* (Gollancz)
Jean Moorcraft Wilson, *Isaac Rosenberg, Poet and Painter* (Cecil Woolf)

number, Jean Liddiard says 5 Adelaide Road. The truth of the matter seems to be that on November 25, 1890, Isaac Rosenberg was born at 5 Adelaide Place near St. Mary Redcliffe. You will not find the house today. In an as yet unpublished article, Dr Diana Collecott, a graduate of our university, tells us of the area that only the Nelson Arms pub on Clarence Road survives after successive extensions of Mardon and Hall's printing works, bombs and council redevelopment. A plaque affixed to Mardon's wall would now offer a welcome, if long over-due, tribute to Rosenberg's memory there.

Before glancing briefly at his life and in more detail at his poetry, which is my true subject, a final bibliographical fact needs to be noted. In 1979 Ian Parsons, shortly before he died, finished editing for Chatto and Windus the definitive *Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, a splendid compilation which gives us not only poems, essays and letters, but reproduces all the extant paintings and drawings of Rosenberg, and very fine they are. If the price of Parson's edition seems to you a trifle exorbitant (it's £12.95), a number of the poems I shall be speaking of are now easily available in Jon Silkin's *Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*.

Isaac Rosenberg's father, Barnett, a Lithuanian Jew, had fled from Russia to avoid military service. He arrived in England in either 1887 or 1888, and was joined — in Bristol — by his wife and their first child, a baby daughter. Some nine years later, with an increasing family, they moved to London. Ian Parsons sums up this phase compactly. Let me quote his words: 'They found,' he says, 'a refuge in England from persecution, but not from poverty. What saved them and is an abiding testimony to the generosity of their co-religionists, was the practical help which they received from the charitable organisations set up by their predecessors in the flight from oppression, some of whom, by their gifts and their industry, had become affluent citizens. Barnett Rosenberg tried his hand at all sorts of jobs, unsuccessfully, and ended up as an itinerant pedlar, earning very little. His wife took in washing and did needlework for neighbours, in order to keep the family going. But in those early London days, and for many years to come, poverty bordering on destitution was their lot. This needs to be said, for poverty was a basic ingredient of Rosenberg's childhood and youth, and it not only helped to mould his character but influenced his whole life, and more especially his development as a creative artist.' (Introduction, p xv.)



Isaac Rosenberg's Three Homes in Bristol (all now destroyed):

- 1** Born at 5 Adelaide Place, Cathay, 1890.
- 2** Victoria Square, Temple.
- 3** Harford Street, Cathay (? No. 2)

Unnamed streets on this plan have all disappeared.

There is a passage in the letters of the great modern German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, which takes us to the heart of Rosenberg's concern as a writer — namely how to make meaningful a life that, on the surface, seems only one of privation, discord and disaster. Rilke is writing at a point in his own life when his deepest sufferings have released some of his greatest poetry, and this is what he says: 'Nobody's position in the world is such that it might not come to be of particular benefit to his soul . . . And I must confess that, whenever I have been compelled to share in the destiny of another, what, above all, seemed to me important and urgent was this: to help the afflicted person to recognise the peculiar and special conditions of his distress — an act which, every time, is not so much one of consolation as of . . . enrichment.' This is surely a salutary sentiment for us in the midst of comfortable moanings, self-pityings and imaginary ills — and, indeed, in the midst of real ills, ills that refuse simply to go away. For these are 'the peculiar and special conditions of our distress' (as Rilke puts it), that refuse to be tranquillised and so robbed of meaning and real content.

This is where the poetry of Rosenberg is so nutrifying, and where it is so different from the war poetry of Wilfred Owen. Owen's poetry seems to be saying to us, 'This ought never to have happened,' whereas Rosenberg's is a poetry which attempts to realise new potentiality in life by saying: 'This *is* and I accept the fact.' There comes to mind his most famous letter: 'I will not leave a corner of my consciousness covered up, but saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life [in the war]', and: 'I believe however hard one's lot is one ought to try and accommodate oneself to the conditions; and except in a case of purely physical pain, I think it can be done . . . I endeavour to waste nothing.'

Rosenberg's endeavour arises directly, then, out of having been born in poverty to a Bristol Jewish family. He was one of six children. After living in two other nearby slum-dwellings (in Victoria Square, Temple, and in Harford Street, Cathay), the family moves when he is seven to the East End of London where hardships are still unremitting. 'You mustn't forget,' he says to one of his correspondents, 'the circumstances I have been brought up in, the little education I have had. Nobody ever told me what to read, or ever put poetry in my way.' At fourteen, in 1904, he is taken from school and apprenticed to an engraving firm. He goes, in 1907, to evening art classes and in 1911 actually

finds patrons to send him to the Slade School of Art. Quarrels with one of these patrons ensue; neither poetry nor painting brings any material gain; in 1914 he is thought to be suffering from tuberculosis and the Jewish Educational Aid Society pays his passage to South Africa where he stays with his sister Minnie. The period in South Africa ends and he is shortly afterwards in the army and, before long, in action, having joined up in order to acquire an allowance for his mother. Ian Parsons puts the matter succinctly, thus: 'At the end of October 1915 he went to Whitehall and joined up, being posted immediately to Bury St. Edmunds, where, because he was such a very small, slight man he was drafted into the so-called "Bantam" battalion of the Suffolk Regiment. Thereafter he was increasingly deprived of the opportunity and the wherewithal to paint, and once he had crossed to France at the beginning of June 1916, they ceased altogether.' But 'I endeavour to waste nothing,' he had written, and his attention now turns wholeheartedly to poetry.

We catch in his earliest letters a hint of that harmony which may be won even in the hardest circumstances. The hint comes in his mention of music — a theme the poems increasingly pursue. 'To most people life is a musical instrument,' he writes, 'on which they are unable to play, but in the musician's hands it becomes a living thing.' And again, confessing that he hasn't had the opportunity to know anything about music: 'Once I heard Schubert's Unfinished Symphony at the band; and — well, I was in heaven . . . it was articulate feeling. The inexpressible in poetry, in painting, was there expressed.' This notion of music as 'articulate feeling' and life as an instrument that one learns to play, was to be worked out in the poems, worked out in confronting a life that was apparently mostly discord and was to end in early death at the age of 28. The problem was, on what terms could this life be accepted and rendered meaningful? 'It is all experience,' he writes in 1911, 'but, good God! it is *all* experience and nothing else.' One is reminded of Keats' letters and of his memorable phrase about life as 'a continual struggle against the suffocation of accidents.'

The history of Rosenberg's struggle goes back to his first long poem, *Night and Day* of 1912, written when Rosenberg, having experienced years of poverty, was coming to recognise 'the peculiar and special conditions of his distress', to recur to Rilke's phrase. What *Night and Day* deals with — very immaturely as yet, and with echoes of Swinburne, Rossetti, *Omar Khayyam*,

the Bible — is the unconditional acceptance of fate. One of the outcomes of this acceptance, once it is achieved, appears in what Rosenberg represents in his work by the symbol of music. Music seems to stand in Rosenberg's poetry for a kind of attitude of mind which can hear, as it were, the true melody of its own being and to which it had previously been deaf because insufficiently alive. This hearing of unearthly music occurs where the conditions of one's fate are fully responded to, and it is associated with a new access of inner power — the kind of power that in the play *Moses*, of 1916, is necessary to release the Jews from their spiritual bondage in Egypt. So Rosenberg's acceptance of fate isn't merely a passive thing, a lying down to be walked over, or a stoical pose: it is the condition that makes lived life possible and that gives it its unpremeditated music.

About *Night and Day* of 1912 and the remarkable volume *Youth* of 1915, I shall be brief, since these pre-date the maturer poetry of *Moses* (1916) and the subsequent *Trench Poems*, as an earlier edition entitled the war poetry. What's striking about both *Night and Day* and *Youth* is the way they go straight to the centre of Rosenberg's mature interests. *Youth* is so structured as to build up to and end with an impressive poem, *God Made Blind*, where fate and what may be won from fate is the abiding question. *Night and Day* had already explored (uncouthly as yet) the symbol of music, as the poet, watched by the stars — 'the steadfast eyes of fate', Rosenberg calls them — , labours for insight and the insights come in the form of music, in four songs which are the four climaxes of the poem. This prentice work shows in embryo the dual nature of Rosenberg's attitude — acceptance, yet advance — a discovery of the real dimension of life through acceptance, a discovery of what he calls here 'the strange wine/Of some large knowledge.' Then at the very end of *Night and Day* the silence of the stars is broken, and the poem closes with a token of this 'large knowledge' — the song of the evening star.

Let us, however, with limited time at our disposal, look ahead to poems of 1915–16, where fate and music recur and where we are made to experience, side by side with the need for acceptance, the pain of fate and the fear of wasted potentiality. Take *First Fruit*:

I did not pluck at all,
And I am sorry now.

The garden is not barred,
But the boughs are heavy with snow,
The flake-blossoms thickly fall,
And the hid roots sigh, 'How long will
our flowers be marred?'

Strange as a bird were dumb,
Strange as a hueless leaf.
As one deaf hungers to hear
Or gazes without belief,
The fruit yearned 'fingers, come'.
O, shut hands, be empty another year.

'I did not pluck at all': life had offered fruit and they hadn't been noticed, hadn't been accepted. This is a poem of unrealised potentiality, a potentiality that now can only be waited for and seized upon when and if it is offered again. It is by way of being a self-reproach — 'I did not pluck at all': failure to be alive to the present hour had impoverished that hour. The life we don't live is impoverished life:

Strange as a bird were dumb,
Strange as a hueless leaf.
As one deaf hungers to hear.

That verb *hear* is the recurrent verb in Rosenberg. At the end of *Night and Day* he *hears* the evening star; in *Moses* music makes itself *heard* as Moses embraces his destiny, and Rosenberg's use of the verb 'to hear' reinforces that sense we get in his work of a dimension we are likely to miss in life because we are deaf to the undertones of reality. Moses lives in fear of uncreative silence, of 'Virgin silences waiting a breaking voice'. In an earlier poem, *A Girl's Thoughts*, a girl resists her fate, clings regressively to her simpler, known self which, as she says, 'strives to shut out what it hears,/The founts of being, murmuring'. These variations on the verb 'to hear' provide Rosenberg with a highly suggestive gamut of expression, covering the symbolic possibilities from the sudden impingement of sounds unnoticed to the full harmonic utterance of music. What he does with this gamut I hope to make clear in looking at Rosenberg's pervasive theme of destiny.

A poem from the fragments of *Moses*, called *Chagrin*, communicates the naked feeling of what it means to be fated. It does

so by the use of the image of Absalom, David's son, caught by his hair in the branches of a tree. This condition of being so caught seems to apply to the whole universe, to that of matter and that of thought. This existential fact is contemplated in all its fearfulness and at the moment of release at the end of the poem, when for a time we seem freed, suddenly we are caught back onto the boughs:

CHAGRIN

Caught still as Absalom,
Surely the air hangs
From the swayless cloud-boughs,
Like hair of Absalom
Caught and hanging still.

From the imagined weight
Of spaces in a sky
Of mute chagrin, my thoughts
Hang like branch-clung hair
To trunks of silence swung,
With the choked soul weighing down
Into thick emptiness.
Christ! end this hanging death,
For endlessness hangs therefrom.

Invisibly — branches break
From invisible trees —
The cloud-woods where we rush,
Our eyes holding so much,
Which we must ride dim ages round
Ere the hands (we dream) can touch,
We ride, we ride, before the morning
The secret roots of the sun to tread,
And suddenly
We are lifted of all we know
And hang from implacable boughs.

When the *Moses* volume appeared, Rosenberg had been in the army a year, exchanging a period of respite from poverty and near poverty — the period spent in South Africa — for the horrors of the Western front:

We ride, we ride, before the morning
The secret roots of the sun to tread,
And suddenly
We are lifted of all we know
And hang from implacable boughs.

But there was something else beside the implacable boughs for Rosenberg and that was those 'secret roots of the sun.' (These roots of the sun, by the way, though spelt like tree-roots, seem to be a pun on the other sort of route.) If 'to hear' is his most significant verb, the word 'root' is the noun we find repeatedly throughout his poems. The phrase in *Chagrin* 'the secret roots of the sun' is already a quotation from an earlier poem called *At Night*, and it's to reappear yet again, this phrase, in different guises — first of all in *Moses* when Moses is talking about the static, priest-ridden world of ancient Egypt and opposes to it his own sense of a wider destiny:

I have a trouble in my mind for largeness,
Rough-hearted, shaggy, which your grave ardours lack.
Here is the quarry quiet for me to hew,
Here are the springs, primeval elements,
The roots' hid secrecy, old source of race,
Unreasoned reason of the savage instinct.

Moses' aim is to put the Jews back into contact with 'the roots' hid secrecy' and to bring them wider possibilities for life by breaking out of the civic mould of the Egyptians in which their potentialities have hardened. He realises that to do so is to release the

Unreasoned reason of the savage instinct,

and that this primal root energy is necessary but that in itself it is insufficient; and Rosenberg defines the insufficiency by placing side by side with the image of the *root* the image of *music*: Moses goes on,

I'd shape one impulse thro' the contraries
Of vain ambitious men, selfish and callous,
And frail life drifters, reticent, delicate.
Litheness thread bulk; a nation's harmony.

The music image — ‘a nation’s harmony’ — is defined and consolidated further as, still speaking of the Jewish slaves, Moses draws towards the conclusion of his speech:

These are not lame, nor bent awry, but placeless
With the rust and stagnant. All that’s low I’ll
charm;
Barbaric love sweeten to tenderness.
Cunning run into wisdom, craft turn to skill.
Their meanness threaded right and sensibly
Change to a prudence, envied and not sneered.
Their hugeness be a driving wedge to a thing,
Ineffable and useable, as near
Solidity as human life can be.
So grandly fashion these rude elements
Into some newer nature, a consciousness
Like naked light seizing the all-eyed soul . . .

The passage grows out of that primitive ‘Unreasoned reason of the savage instinct’ to an image of full consciousness: ‘the all-eyed soul’. Its craggy plunging energy mimes this growth as it moves from term to term. Each term in the passage, that is ‘rough . . . new, and will have no tailor’ (to quote Rosenberg) — namely bulk, barbaric love, hugeness — all these are poised against a humanising, subtilizing counterpart, against liteness and tenderness. Similarly, the fallen elements of the Jewish slaves — cunning, craft, meanness — are juxtaposed by wisdom, skill, prudence. The terms balance out into the word *solidity* near the close with its sense of physical rootedness, combining with the spiritual insight of ‘a consciousness/Like naked light seizing the all-eyed soul.’

This conception of ordered human potentialities, coming at the play’s climax, is focussed upon the significance of partaking of a meaningful destiny by the act of choice. Moses chooses to break with the static, destiny-less Egyptian world of priests and forms. He must move forward to the unknown and the unlivd, though the play itself ends in his arrest and on the words ‘or die’. Behind the play, of course, are the tensions and fears of Rosenberg’s own existence — ‘I endeavour to waste nothing’. He, too, like Moses, had ‘a trouble in [his] mind for largeness,’ and one notes in the letters his impatience with the constricted form-bound world of contemporary England and its material certainties. Its



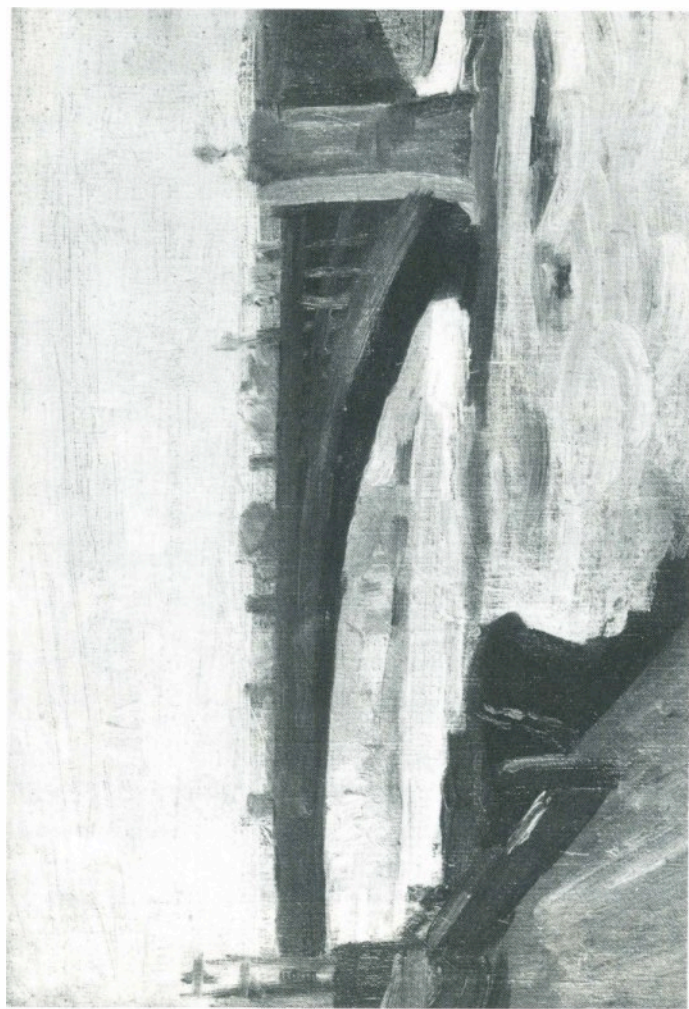
Isaac Rosenberg, *Sea and Beach* (1910). Oil 8½" × 12½". Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum



Isaac Rosenberg, *Figures seated round a Table* (c. 1910). Pen and wash, 5½" x 7".
Courtesy of Carlisle Museum and Art Gallery.



Isaac Rosenberg, *Two Figures at a Table* (c. 1910) Pen and wash,
6'' × 4



Isaac Rosenberg, *Blackfriars Bridge* (1911). Oil 8" x 12".
Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum.

mental horizons were represented by Horatio Bottomley's popular magazine, *John Bull*, and the campaign waged there in mock puritan horror to secure the banning of D.H. Lawrence's novel, *The Rainbow* — is this the kind of book you would have your daughters read?

At first Rosenberg had seen the war as a welcome end to that narrow world of British commercialism whose spirit he recognised in the Cape Town of 1914, the passageways to the souls of its inhabitants 'dreadfully clogged up' as he wrote '— gold dust, diamond dust, stocks and shares, and heaven knows what other flinty muck.' Rosenberg shared with so many others of his generation their contempt for British mercantilism, and he shared with them, too, the apocalyptic sense that English civilisation, like other civilisations that had failed and disappeared, was now doomed to extinction. He broods on the spiritual somnolence of England in *A worm fed on the heart of Corinth*:

A worm fed on the heart of Corinth,
Babylon and Rome:
Not Paris raped tall Helen,
But this incestuous worm,
Who lured her vivid beauty
To his amorphous sleep.
England! famous as Helen
Is thy betrothal sung
To him the shadowless,
More amorous than Solomon.

Would the war, perhaps, renovate England with its cleansing fire? Might it not sweep clean the human mind of dead forms, might its demands not restore to men spiritual energies they had ignored? In his poetry he asked of the 'crimson curse' of war to 'Give back this universe/Its pristine bloom.' This romantic hopefulness, like Rainer Maria Rilke's hopefulness when he (on the other side) wrote his five hymns to the war, was not lasting, but it didn't turn to its usual alternative, romantic despair, or to Owen's pity or Lawrence's angry rejection. War, like the destiny of Moses in Egypt, meant for Rosenberg the necessity of exposing more of himself, of living and growing with tragic awareness. He tried to see in war, as one of his earliest critics, D.W. Harding, has said, 'a significance for life as such, rather

than seeing only its convulsion of the human life he knew.² He tried, in his poetry, Harding goes on, to define 'the living effort called forth by war.' In short, this is the discipline that Rilke speaks of — the need to 'recognize the peculiar and special conditions of [one's] distress' by the refusal to simplify these in one's consciousness. In the letters the result is the astonishing impersonality of Rosenberg's descriptions of his own sufferings in the trenches. In the poems he ranges from humane detachment through stark realism to heroic acceptance. In *Break of Day in the Trenches* one has the humane Rosenberg:

The darkness crumbles away.
It is the same old druid Time as ever,
Only a live thing leaps my hand,
A queer sardonic rat,
As I pull the parapet's poppy
To stick behind my ear.
Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.
Now you have touched this English hand
You will do the same to a German
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
To cross the sleeping green between.
It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,
Less chanced than you for life,
Bonds to the whims of murder,
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
The torn fields of France.
What do you see in our eyes
At the shrieking iron and flame
Hurled through still heavens?
What quaver — what heart aghast?
Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
Drop, and are ever dropping;
But mine in my ear is safe —
Just a little white with the dust.

2. D.W. Harding, 'The Poetry of Isaac Rosenberg', *Scrutiny* III, no. 4, March 1935, 358–369. Also appears as chapter five of *Experience into Words* (1963).

His sense of 'shrieking iron and flame/Hurled through still heavens' is intensified in *Dead Man's Dump*, his most extended war poem, where he comes closest to Owen. The limbers he speaks of here are the detachable forepart of gun carriages used for the transport of barbed wire and metal stakes:

The plunging limbers over the shattered track
Racketed with their rusty freight,
Stuck out like many crowns of thorns,
And the rusty stakes like sceptres old
To stay the flood of brutish men
Upon our brothers dear.

The wheels lurched over sprawled dead
But pained them not, though their bones crunched,
Their shut mouths made no moan.
They lie there huddled, friend and foeman,
Man born of man, and born of woman,
And shells go crying over them
From night till night and now.

Earth has waited for them
All the time of their growth
Fretting for their decay:
Now she has them at last!
In the strength of their strength
Suspended — stopped and held.

What fierce imaginings their dark souls lit?
Earth! have they gone into you!
Somewhere they must have gone,
And flung on your hard back
Is their souls' sack
Emptied of God-ancestralled essences.
Who hurled them out? Who hurled?

None saw their spirits' shadow shake the grass,
Or stood aside for the half used life to pass
Out of those doomed nostrils and the doomed mouth,
When the swift iron burning bee
Drained the wild honey of their youth . . .

I pause half way through the poem, at a point where you can see the characteristic Rosenberg coming into view after what sounds a bit like Wilfred Owen. Owen doesn't have this sense of the numinous, of 'God-ancestral essences'. When Rosenberg speaks of waste, as Owen does, in that phrase about the 'half-used life'

(None saw their spirits' shadow shake the grass,
Or stood aside for the half used life to pass
Out of those doomed nostrils . . .)

he does so against the background we've been looking at — the background of his desire to accept fate in its totality. He's aware of the waste, but unlike Owen, he can go on to contemplate a further possibility than waste in war — the possibility of that living effort called forth by it, as Harding says. In the first version of the poem from which I have just read, *Dead Man's Dump*, Rosenberg asks what sort of men death takes up in war — what can be said about this 'half used life' at the point of death:

Dark Earth! Dark Heaven! swinging in chemic smoke,
What dead are born when you kiss each soundless soul
With lightning and thunder from your mined heart
Which man's self dug, and his blind fingers loosed?

Perhaps the word 'soundless' — if we recall Rosenberg's use of the verb 'to hear' — is meant to imply not merely that the souls were stunned into silence by the noise of battle but that the souls lacked the significant music that Rosenberg finds in an achieved destiny. At all events the question — 'What dead are born when you kiss each soundless soul?' is never answered. Instead the poem continues:

A man's brains splattered on
A stretcher-bearer's face;
His shook shoulders slipped their load,
But when they bent to look again
The drowning soul was sunk too deep
For human tenderness.

They left this dead with the older dead,
Stretched at the cross roads.

The half-used life is left at that, 'joined', as Rosenberg says, 'to the great sunk silences', wasted. Yet we have the sense at the back of the poem — and this is where Rosenberg is least like Owen — that the waste was not merely that of human life but the waste of death. Rosenberg seems to be implying that, had there been possible among these half-used lives the open readiness for the music of destiny, the half-used life could have achieved a heightened spiritual power, an intensity which would have been beyond pity because having no need for it. This is a conception which an essentially humanistic poet like Wilfred Owen never entertained — the waste of a death as well as the waste of a life. And, indeed, for Rosenberg it was not a conception easily contemplated. He attempted its full and painful contemplation in what he thought of as his finest poem, *Daughters of War*.

He wrote from France shortly before his death: 'It has taken me about a year to write.' He has, he says, 'striven hard to get that sense of the inexorableness the human (or inhuman) side of war has.' In *Daughters of War*, Rosenberg imagines Amazon-like figures in the beyond, resembling the Valkyries, who receive the released spirits of the slain earth-men as their lovers:

Space beats the ruddy freedom of their limbs —
Their naked dances with man's spirit naked
By the root side of the tree of life,
(The underside of things
And shut from earth's profoundest eyes).

The ubiquitous image of the root is there again in 'the root side of the tree of life' and with the force of the poem behind it, that image attempts to unite Rosenberg's idea of the life fed from the deepest energies with the death died in the possession of that full-fed life. What is inexorable in life has to be faced by the individual if he wishes to attain that dimension, if he wishes to be the lover of the daughters of war in the poem and not merely the good citizen, the man bounded by the social rut as were the Jewish slaves in their Egyptian captivity.

How successful is *Daughters of War*? It was clearly a very important poem for Rosenberg, important for what it represented in terms of sheer spiritual effort. Dr Leavis, in a pioneer article, placing Rosenberg with Keats and Hopkins, claims it as

one of the truly great English poems.³ I wonder, myself, whether the kind of thing it is trying to do is not, perhaps, more impressive than the final product — whether the spiritual effort did not go into the sheer fact of contemplating and preparing oneself for the full death rather than into the art of the poem about the full death, the full death that (Rosenberg tells us) gives the earthmen ‘new hearing’ as they drink its ‘sound’. What weakens the poem itself is its purple diction. Good and bad are so closely entwined in it, it’s difficult to disentangle them:

I saw in prophetic gleams
These mighty daughters in their dances
Beckon each soul aghast from its crimson corpse
To mix in their glittering dances.
I heard the mighty daughters’ giant sighs
In sleepless passion for the sons of valour,
And envy of the days of flesh
Barring their love with mortal boughs across —
The mortal boughs — the mortal tree of life.

Even there, with the bits of Blake and the crimson corpses, one can see the attempt to articulate an interesting and central idea of Rosenberg’s:

And envy of the days of flesh
Barring their love with mortal boughs across . . .

The mortal tree of life wants protection from the full death — it resists a possible dimension; it wants to protect the dying from the weight of their death as, in a sense, Wilfred Owen did. ‘This book is not about heroes,’ Owen had said of *his* poems. But Rosenberg’s book is very much about heroes, or rather about the possibility of heroism — heroism, note, not patriotism. If the possibility is not poetically achieved in *Daughters of War*, the attempt at any rate was a highly important one. Something closer to achievement occurs in a more modest poem like *Returning we hear the larks*. It brings back once more our theme of music, in describing a return to camp in the thick of war and symbolising

3. F.R. Leavis, ‘The Recognition of Isaac Rosenberg’ (review of *Complete Works*), *Scrutiny* VI, no. 2, 1937, 229–235.

the terrible and vulnerable beauty of experience in a song that is heard while its source is unseen:

Sombre the night is.
And though we have our lives, we know
What sinister threat lurks there.

Dragging these anguished limbs, we only know
This poison-blasted track opens on our camp —
On a little safe sleep.

But hark! — joy — joy — strange joy.
Lo! heights of night ringing with unseen larks.
Music showering our upturned list'ning faces.

Death could drop from the dark
As easily as song —
But song only dropped,
Like a blind man's dreams on the sand
By dangerous tides,
Like a girl's dark hair for she dreams no
 ruin lies there,
Or her kisses where a serpent hides.

The ideal behind Rosenberg's poems comes close to Nietzsche's definition of the Dionysiac spirit in *The Birth of Tragedy* — 'The affirmative answer to life, even in its strangest and hardest problems; the will to life, rejoicing . . . at its own inexhaustible nature.' But to guard against the rhetoric, the stoical fanfares in the face of a meaningless universe that Nietzsche usually sounds off, one can say also that the spirit of Rosenberg's poetry is profoundly Biblical, with its sense of the need to hallow life by spiritual effort and of the need to accept the destiny of suffering ordained by transcendent powers. He was still working at this conception in his unfinished play *The Unicorn*, a play variously about the impingement of the unknown into the lives of ordinary people, into a humdrum marriage, and also about the symbolic unicorn uprooting, destroying, that all may begin anew. I want to draw towards a close, with the description from the first draft of the play, *The Amulet*, of the arrival of the unknown in the shape of a storm and a strange man to Saul, whose marriage is failing and who has ceased to live the full spiritual life. His cart is stuck in the mud and out of the storm

which has scattered the human certainties of his life he hears the unpremeditated music of the unknown. The landscape in which all this occurs, with its rain and mud, clearly recalls the western front.

The slime clung
And licked and clawed and chewed the clogged
dragging wheels
Till they sunk nigh to the axle. Saul sodden and
vexed
Like fury smote the mules' mouths, pulling but sweat
From his drowned hair and theirs, while the thunder
knocked
And all the air yawned water, falling water,
And the light cart was water, like a wrecked raft,
And all seemed like a forest under the ocean.
Sudden the lightning flashed upon a figure
Moving as a man moves in the slipping mud
But singing not as a man sings, through the storm,
Which could not drown his sounds.

The Unicorn was never finished. It is merely a series of drafts. Writing from the trenches in 1916, Rosenberg speaks of the skin that must grow 'round and through a poet's ideas if they are to be presented whole' and he adds: 'If you are not free, you can only, when the ideas come hot, seize them with the skin in tatters, raw, crude, in some parts beautiful, in others monstrous.' This very much describes the effect of many of his poems, a fact which makes him so difficult a writer to assess. One critic, David Daiches, goes so far as to suggest that Rosenberg's survival might have changed the entire course of modern English poetry, that he might have inaugurated a new romanticism distinct from the metaphysical strain of T.S. Eliot.⁴ But such claims, of course, one can only leave in the area of speculation, tempting as they are.

Rosenberg — and there is some pleasure in being able to say this in a church — was in a very fundamental sense a religious poet. He feels that the demands made upon him are transcendent ones. Indeed we should be grateful to Isaac Rosenberg that, in an increasingly humanist world, he awakes us to the awareness of

4. David Daiches, review of *Collected Poems*, *Commentary* X, no. 1, July 1950, 91–93.

the barrenness of that world if it no longer lies open to what exceeds the merely human and the merely civic vision of life. And we should be not only grateful but proud that we can say of him, 'Isaac Rosenberg of Bristol.'

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Produced by Alan Sutton Publishing Limited.

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Price 80p. 1982